

**Ah Ma and her Beliefs:**

**The Migrant Experience and Religious Practices of a**

**Chinese Immigrant Woman in Twentieth Century Singapore**

Chia Meng Tat, Jack

**Abstract:**

This essay aims to use my family history as a prism to examine the religious beliefs and practices of the Chinese diaspora in twentieth century Singapore. It contends that religion played a vital role in shaping the communal identity and contributing to the spiritual well-being of the Chinese migrants. By exploring the migrant experience, and analyzing the religious beliefs and practices of my Ah Ma as told to me, this essay attempts to answer three big questions: what did religion mean to the overseas Chinese community in general and my Ah Ma—a Chinese immigrant woman—in particular?; what were these religious beliefs and practices, and what functions did they serve?; and finally, how could the study of my Ah Ma's religious beliefs offer an alternative narrative to Singapore's history?

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**Introduction**

Ah Ma (an affectionate Hokkien term for grandmother) was born in the Fujian province of China. She migrated to Singapore with her foster mother at the tender age of four. When Ah Ma was young, she often followed her foster mother to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals, and worship in local Chinese temples. Since then, such religious practices had become an essential part of her life. As a third generation Chinese Singaporean who is interested in the study of overseas Chinese history, Ah Ma's religious beliefs and practices are indeed fascinating yet foreign to me. This essay aims to use my family history as a prism to examine the religious beliefs and practices of the Chinese diaspora in twentieth century Singapore. I argue that religion played a vital role in shaping the communal identity and contributing to the spiritual well-being of the Chinese migrants. By exploring the migrant experience, and analyzing the religious beliefs and practices of my Ah Ma as told to me, this essay attempts to answer three big questions: what did religion mean to the overseas Chinese community in general and my Ah Ma—a Chinese immigrant woman—in particular?; what were these religious beliefs and practices, and what functions did they serve?; and finally, how could the study of my Ah Ma's religious beliefs offer an alternative narrative to Singapore's history?

First, I will review the existing literature on Chinese diaspora in Singapore and discuss the methodology for this study. Next, I will present a concise historical background on my Ah Ma's migration to Singapore and her migrant experience to provide the context for this study. I then

discuss the meaning of religion and its communal and spiritual functions amongst the overseas Chinese community. Finally, I situate my Ah Ma's narrative within the national discourse, and conclude that religion entails a sense of community and spirituality for a Chinese immigrant woman in twentieth century Singapore.

### Literature Review and Methodology

There are huge amounts of literature, both in English and Chinese language, available on the history of overseas Chinese in Singapore. Yen Ching-hwang and C. F. Yong, two historians on overseas Chinese history, offer valuable insights on the history of Chinese diasporic community in Singapore. Yen's two books, *Class Structure and Social Mobility in the Chinese Community in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911*<sup>i</sup> and *Studies in Modern Overseas Chinese History*<sup>ii</sup>, and Yong's *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore*<sup>iii</sup> discuss the importance of Chinese associations and organizations among the overseas Chinese community. However, these three books did not explore the religious beliefs and organizations established by the Chinese migrants. Wang Gungwu, an eminent historian in Chinese history, published several influential books on the history of overseas Chinese. Wang's *China and the Chinese Overseas*, a collected volume of sixteen essays, and his recent book *Don't Leave Home: Migration and the Chinese*, deal with both the history of overseas China in historical perspective and the contemporary themes on overseas Chinese.<sup>iv</sup> However, Wang did not attempt to examine the religious beliefs and practices of the overseas Chinese community.

Maurice Freedman's *The Study of Chinese Society: Essays* provides a useful preliminary study of the Chinese diasporic community. He argued that the Chinese migrant community in Singapore "lived with a double framework" and were "dependent both on China and on the colonial plural society of which they were numerically the greater part".<sup>v</sup> For this reason, the Singapore Chinese had maintained a religious system that was recognized "as characteristically Chinese", and which had been "affected by religious changes in the homeland".<sup>vi</sup> In his book *Ocean gods: Chinese sea god worship and socio-economy (Haiyang shenling: Zhongguo haishen xinyang yu shehui jingji)*, Wang Rongguo points out that migrants brought along their religious beliefs and practices into the foreign lands. As they settled in the new environment, they started building temples, which symbolically functioned as their pillar of "spiritual support".<sup>vii</sup> The recent edited volume *Folk Culture and Chinese Community (Minjian wenhua yu Huaren shehui)* published by the Singapore Society of Asian Studies, which consists of eleven essays, explores the culture, business, and religion of the overseas Chinese community in Singapore and beyond.<sup>viii</sup> However, the essays that examine the religious beliefs of the Chinese community are overly focused on the temples and organizations, and neglected the beliefs and practices of the individual migrants.

From the literature review, it seems that on one hand, most of the representative writings on the history of overseas Chinese in Singapore tend to overlook the religious aspect of the migrants. On the other, while some of the previous studies attempted to study the religions of the Chinese migrants, they tend to over-generalize and simplify the religious beliefs and practices of the community, by either regarding them as a monolithic collective or merely concentrating on the

temples and organizations. Religious beliefs and practices vary considerably from one individual to another. With this background, this study, by scrutinizing the religious beliefs and practices of my Ah Ma as told to me, attempts to fill some of these gaps.

The oral interviews with my Ah Ma (Mdm Kok) and my mother (Mdm Chan) constitute the basis of this study.<sup>ix</sup> These informal and loosely structured interviews offer valuable insights to the religious beliefs and practices of the overseas Chinese community in general and my Ah Ma in particular. A limitation to the use of these oral sources is that my Ah Ma, due to old age, had forgotten some of the details of the things that had happened to her. Nonetheless, her oral account remains useful material for this study. In addition, I supplement the two interviews with both English and Chinese secondary works, to construct a lesser-known dimension of the Chinese diasporic community in twentieth century Singapore.

### **Ah Ma's Migration to Singapore and her Migrant Experience**

Ah Ma was born in 1932 in China, Fujian Province. Shortly after her birth, she was given away to an unmarried female family friend who became known as her foster mother.<sup>x</sup> The poor living conditions and widespread poverty during the first three decades of the twentieth century caused hardship among the Chinese population. For reasons of survival, many had to migrate and seek livelihood elsewhere. Ah Ma's family circumstances were poor and could hardly meet their subsistence needs. As such, her foster mother had no choice but to bring her to leave their homeland in search of employment opportunities in Singapore.

In 1935, Ah Ma at her tender age of four with her foster mother, traveled from Fujian to Singapore by ship. Conditions on the ship were bad. She and her foster mother had to overcome food shortage, overcrowding, and seasickness. According to Ah Ma, there were then no regulations on migration to Singapore.<sup>xi</sup> Therefore, no passport was required to travel from China to Singapore and vice versa. The absence of migration restrictions encouraged a substantial number of Chinese migrants to come over to the island in search for greater employment and business opportunities. Ah Ma could not recall how long exactly was the sea journey before she and her foster mother reached Singapore.

Upon their arrival in Singapore, Ah Ma and her foster mother had to source for two important necessities—food and accommodation. Ah Ma's foster mother rented a small room in a house located in Tanjong Pagar. They rented the smallest bedroom situated at the corner of the house, which cost them a few dollars a month. Living conditions were harsh, characterized by crowding, poor sanitation, and lack of hygiene. Due to the lack of a dining area, Ah Ma and her foster mother even had to consume their meals in the bedroom. They also did not have a bed and hence had to sleep on a mat on the floor. Life was very difficult for my Ah Ma. As her foster mother was often out at work and seldom around with her, she had to learn to look after herself at her very young age. Fortunately, the landlord was very kind and accommodating, and she often cooked and offered food to my Ah Ma.

The fall of Singapore and the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 was a time of anxiety and hardship for Ah Ma and her foster mother. The food ration given to them by the Japanese military government was barely sufficient. Ah Ma and her foster mother had to source for sweet potatoes

and tapioca to supplement their diet. The Japanese occupation was a time of fear and uncertainty. Fearing harassment from the Japanese soldiers, Ah Ma hardly stepped out of the house during the three and a half years of occupation.

After the Japanese occupation, Ah Ma started to work in a farm in Hai Lam Swa (present-day Bishan). She had to water and fertilize the vegetables, take care of the banana trees, and feed the pigs. Working in a farm was certainly not an easy task. Ah Ma could still recall having to wake up very early around 5am every morning and travel from her home in Tanjong Pagar to the farm in Hai Lam Swa. At the farm, she needed to draw water from the well to water the vegetables, and even had to collect human wastes as fertilizer. Having to collect and distribute human wastes in the planting fields as fertilizer was a nauseating experience for Ah Ma. With the monthly salary received, Ah Ma was able to help her foster mother to pay for the rental and food. She was also able to save up some money to buy some new clothes to replace the old and tattered ones.

Ah Ma was married to my grandfather in 1950. Life was slowly changing for the better after her marriage. My grandfather worked in shipyard and earned about \$4 a day. He would give her money to pay for the room rental and the household expenses. My Ah Ma and grandfather then decided to rent a bigger room in the same house, which cost them around \$17 a month. There, my uncle and aunt were born. By the time when my Ah Ma was pregnant with my mother, she and my grandfather decided to move from the rented room in Tanjong Pagar to a bigger attap house in Siglap Road. Unfortunately, the attap house was often flooded and caused a lot of inconvenience. Ah Ma pointed out that whenever there was flood, the whole family had to sit on the bed and wait for the water to recede. Consequently, they decided to move to a two-room apartment in See Ka Teng (present-day Tiong Bahru).

The family stayed there for a couple of years before moving back to the Tanjong Pagar area. My grandfather then decided to use his savings in the Central Provident Fund (CPF) account to purchase a flat in Clementi. In the 1970s, the whole family moved to Clementi Avenue One and stayed there for the next twenty years. After their marriage, my first uncle, my aunt, and my mother established their own family and had their own houses. My Ah Ma continued to stay in Clementi with my second uncle before she finally sold the flat and moved into a new apartment at Bukit Batok in 1997.

Ah Ma's migration to Singapore and her migrant experience was one of hardship, poverty, and at times, uncertainty. She had to overcome the poor living conditions and the harsh working environment to earn enough money to pay for her accommodation and food. While Ah Ma's life slightly improved after her marriage to my grandfather, the family did not have a permanent housing and often had to move for one reason or another, until they finally purchased a flat in the 1970s. In times of hardship, poverty, and uncertainty, religion played an important role in shaping Ah Ma's migrant experience.

## Finding Meaning in Religion

Upon reaching Singapore, Ah Ma and her foster mother went to Tian Hock Keng Temple to give thanks to Mazu.<sup>xii</sup> Established in 1840 by the Hokkien migrants, Tian Hock Keng Temple was (and remains) one of the oldest Chinese temples in Singapore.<sup>xiii</sup> Many Chinese immigrants, including my Ah Ma, believed that Mazu is the patron deity of the sea. Hence, many Chinese migrants who arrived safely in Singapore by sea would go to the Tian Hock Keng Temple to make offerings to Mazu.

What does religion mean to the overseas Chinese community in general and my Ah Ma in particular? According to my Ah Ma, she inherited her religious beliefs and practices from her foster mother. When Ah Ma was young, she often followed her foster mother to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals (*toa li ji*), and to worship in local Chinese temples. Ever since then, she adopted such religious beliefs and practices from her foster mother and accepted them as an essential part of her life.



**Plate 1:** Tian Hock Keng Temple



**Plate 2:** Mazu

To my Ah Ma, religion is the “belief in a transcendent being who can watch over her and her family, and bring them happiness, protection, safety, and wealth”.<sup>xiv</sup> While she calls herself a Buddhist, her idea of “Buddhism” is very much referring to Chinese syncretic religions consisting of Buddhist, Confucianist, and Taoist elements (*sanjiao heyi*). There is no central doctrine or canonical text in her “Buddhist” beliefs. She neither takes refuge in the Triple Gems—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—nor recite any Buddhist scriptures. To her, “Buddhist” belief means:

As long as I do good deeds and do not harm others, the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and gods will protect my family and me. When I need any help, I will just go to them and they will help me by answering my prayers.<sup>xv</sup>

Vivienne Wee, in her seminal research on Buddhism in Singapore, points out that despite about fifty percent of the Singaporean population declare themselves as “Buddhists” and use a single religious label, they “do not in fact share a unitary religion”.<sup>xvi</sup> She suggests that “‘Buddhist’ systems as practiced in Singapore must therefore be considered in the larger context of Chinese religious behaviour”.<sup>xvii</sup> For this reason, for a significant number of Singaporean “Buddhists” such as my Ah Ma, the word “Buddhism” actually refers to Chinese syncretic religions.

To most Chinese migrants including my Ah Ma, the meaning of religion was not a question of canonical orthodoxy or the attempt to seek after-life salvation. Religious beliefs were very important because they offered an answer to their very pragmatic concerns—happiness, protection, safety, and wealth—and provided a source of comfort, inspiration, and even solace.<sup>xviii</sup>

### **Communal and Spiritual Functions of Religious Beliefs and Practices**

Ah Ma took part in many “non-Buddhistic” festivals and ceremonies, including the birthday celebrations of the various deities such as Guan Yin (Goddess of Mercy), Mazu, Tian Gong, and Toa Pek Kong; Cheng Beng Festival,<sup>xix</sup> and Hungry Ghost Festival (*Zhongyuanjie*). On the birthdays of the deities, she would usually go to the Tian Hock Keng Temple or the Waterloo Street Guanyin Temple (*Simalu Guanyinmiao*) to pray. Therefore, it was not surprising that she also engaged in several “non-Buddhistic” practices such as burning of joss-papers, drawing divine lots, fortune telling, and spirit mediumship.<sup>xx</sup> These religious practices took place both at the altar in her home and at the temples. To my Ah Ma, the burning of joss paper symbolized the “offering of money to the deities and the ghosts”, while the drawing of divine lots, fortune telling, and spirit mediumship were the various methods to “seek help and guidance from the divine beings”.<sup>xxi</sup> These practices were thus sacred and very important to her.



**Plate 3:** Waterloo Street Guanyin Temple

The functions of religious beliefs and practices can be analyzed as follows. Firstly, religious beliefs and practices contributed to the shaping of a Chinese communal identity. As Ah Ma points out:

We participate in religious festivals and ceremonies not just because of our religious beliefs but also because of our Chinese communal identity. When we get together to pray and celebrate any festival or ceremony, we always remember that we are Chinese and that our culture and religion came from China.<sup>xxii</sup>

In other words, religious beliefs and practices played an important role in building a sense of community, identity, and solidarity among the Chinese migrant community. When they gathered and participated in such occasions and rituals, they saw themselves not just as religious believers professing the same faith, but also as ethnically Chinese.

Secondly, religious beliefs and practices have a spiritual function. For the majority of the overseas Chinese community, religion was their source of comfort, refuge, and solace. Ah Ma added that “whenever the Chinese migrants experienced crisis, difficulties, or hardship, or when they received promotion or achieved success, they would offer prayers at a local temple”.<sup>xxiii</sup> On one hand, the spiritual function of religion provided emotional support for the distressed migrants and offered them a sense of hope and optimism in a place far away from home. On the other, while the migrants regarded success as a result of their individual endeavor, they also saw it as the divine providence of the deities from above. Religion therefore served a very important spiritual function in the lives of the Chinese immigrants.

### **Situating Ah Ma’s Narrative within the National Discourse**

In the national discourse, better known as the “Singapore Story”, Singapore’s history is simplified into six time periods: 1819-1945 Colonial Period; 1945-1955 Political Awakening; 1955-1961 Communist Threat; 1961-1963 Battle for Merger; 1963-1965 Merger Years; and 1965-Present From Survival to Progress.<sup>xxiv</sup> The overemphasis on the major political developments and leadership of the People’s Action Party (PAP) in the “Singapore Story” is, as Loh Kah Seng suggests, “an important legitimizing instrument in sustaining the hegemony of the governing [PAP]”.<sup>xxv</sup>

Indeed, the narratives of individuals have been silence in the dominant national discourse. The individual consciousness and complexities of the Chinese migrants in Singapore in the nineteenth and early twentieth century are simplified into a broad time frame known as “1819-1945 Colonial Period” without taking into account their culture, identity, problems, religions, and so on.

My Ah Ma’s narrative demonstrates that Singapore’s history is far more multifaceted, and therefore cannot be simply understood as the major political developments and leadership of the PAP.

Chinese immigrants each have a different set of experiences, and religious beliefs and practices. To my Ah Ma, her migrant experience was one filled with hardship, poverty, and uncertainty. Religious beliefs and practices therefore provided her with a sense of community and spirituality. In times of crisis and difficulties, she was able to pray for divine intervention, and seek comfort and solace in her faith. Ah Ma’s migrant experience and her religious beliefs and practices, thus reflect the

broader experiences of Chinese immigrants in general and immigrant women in particular, that are absent in the “Singapore Story”, and have yet to be told.

## **Conclusion**

This short essay neither does enough justice to illustrate the complexities of my family history nor the multifaceted life of my Ah Ma. As such, I have chosen to narrow my study to focus on just the religious beliefs and practices of my Ah Ma. This essay argues that religion played a vital role in shaping the communal identity and contributing to the spiritual well-being of the Chinese migrants. Communally, religion contributed to building a sense of community, identity, and solidarity among the Chinese migrant community. Spiritually, religion offered emotional support for the migrants and provided them with a sense of hope and optimism. For my Ah Ma, her migrant experience was one filled with hardship, poverty, and uncertainty. Therefore, Ah Ma’s religious beliefs and practices gave her with a sense of communal identity and spirituality. Ah Ma’s migrant experience and her religious beliefs and practices, which reflect the broader experiences of Chinese immigrants in general and immigrant women in particular, are absent in the national narrative. Her account therefore offers an alternative narrative to the “Singapore Story”—the national discourse—which is dominated by the major political developments and leadership of the PAP. This essay, by exploring the migrant experience, religious beliefs, and practices of my Ah Ma as told to me, has hoped to fill some of these gaps.



**Notes:**

- i Yen Ching-hwang, *Class Structure and Social Mobility in the Chinese Community in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide, Centre for Asian Studies, 1983).
- ii Yen Ching-hwang, *Studies in Modern Overseas Chinese History* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1995).
- iii C. F. Yong, *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992).
- iv Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1991); Wang Gungwu, *Don't Leave Home: Migration and the Chinese* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2001).
- v Maurice Freedman, *The Study of Chinese Society: Essays* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1979), p. 163.
- vi Ibid.
- vii Wang Rongguo, *Haiyang shenling: Zhongguo haishen xinyang yu shehui jingji* [*Ocean gods: Chinese sea god worship and socio-economy*] (Nanchangshi: Jiangxi gaoxiao chubanshe, 2003), p. 159.
- viii Li Weiyl, ed., *Minjian wenhua yu Huaren shehui* [Folk Culture and Chinese Community] (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 2006).
- ix For brief information and synopsis of the interviews, see Appendix.
- x Mdm Kok, interview by author, 28 March 2007.
- xi Ibid.
- xii Ibid.
- xiii Xu Liying, "Zaiguo jia yu shequn zhijian: Xinjiapo huaren miaoyu shehui gongneng de zhuanhuan—yi Tianfugong weili" [Between nation and community: The changing social functions of Chinese temples in Singapore—A Case study of Tian Hock Keng Temple], in *Minjian wenhua yu Huaren shehui*, p. 18; For a history of Tian Hock Keng Temple, see, for example *Bojing nanming: Tianfugong yu fujian huiguan* [Peaceful Waves from the Southern Seas: Tian Hock Keng Temple and the Fujian Association] (Singapore: Xinjiapo fujian huiguan, 2005).
- xiv Mdm Kok, interview by author, 28 March 2007.
- xv Ibid.
- xvi Vivienne Wee, "Buddhism in Singapore," in *Understanding Singapore Society*, eds. Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiong and Tan Ern Ser (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997), p. 130.
- xvii Ibid., p. 131
- xviii Mdm Kok, interview by author, 28 March 2007; Mdm Chan, interview by author, 29 March 2007.
- xix Cheng Beng Festival is a festival to remember, honour, and pay respect to one's deceased ancestors and family members.
- xx Mdm Kok, interview by author, 28 March 2007; Mdm Chan, interview by author, 29 March 2007.
- xxi Mdm Kok, interview by author, 28 March 2007.
- xxii Ibid.
- xxiii Ibid.
- xxiv See *The Singapore Story: Overcoming the Odds* (Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1998); Singapore Infomap, *The Singapore Story: Overcoming the Odds*, [http://www.sg/explore/multimedia\\_story.htm](http://www.sg/explore/multimedia_story.htm) (accessed 30 March 2007).
- xxv Loh Kah Seng, "Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore," *Crossroads* 12, 2 (1998): 1.

## Appendix:

### Brief Information and Synopsis of Interviews:

**Interviewee** Mdm Kok  
**Born** 1932  
**Location** Bukit Batok  
**Date** 28 March 2007  
**Interviewer** Jack Chia  
**Medium** Hokkien  
**Running Time (hh:mm:ss)** 00:34:21

**Synopsis** Personal background. Left China in 1935 at the age of four. Sea journey to Singapore. Stayed in Tanjong Pagar with her foster mother. Several Chinese temples were present in Singapore when she arrived. Regards herself as a Buddhist. Prayed to Mazu at Tian Hock Keng Temple. Followed her foster mother to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals, and worship in local Chinese temples. Life was difficult for a Chinese immigrant woman. Participated in religious festivals and ceremonies. Memories of Second World War. Started to work in a farm in Hai Lam Swa after the war. Religion contributed to a sense of community and solidarity among the Chinese community. Pray to the deities for protection, comfort, and solace.

**Interviewee** Mdm Chan  
**Born** 1956  
**Location** Depot Road  
**Date** 29 March 2007  
**Interviewer** Jack Chia  
**Medium** Mandarin  
**Running Time (hh:mm:ss)** 00:30:42

**Synopsis** Personal background. Second daughter of Mdm Kok. Born in Singapore. Inherited the religious beliefs and practices from her mother. Continue to participate in most of the religious festivals and ceremonies, including the birthday celebrations of the various deities such as Guan Yin (Goddess of Mercy); Cheng Beng Festival; and Hungry Ghost Festival. Also, she carries on some of the religious practices such as the burning of joss-papers.

**Charcter Glossary:**

Cheng Beng (Festival)	清明节
Guan Yin	观音
Hai Lam Swa	海南山
Mazu	妈祖
sanjiao heyi	三教合一
See Ka Teng	四脚亭
Simalu Guanyinmiao	四马路观音庙
Tanjong Pagar	丹戎巴葛
Tian Gong	天公
Tian Hock Keng	天福宫
toa li ji	大日子
Toa Pek Kong	大伯公
Zhongyuanjie	中元节

## Literature:

### Primary Sources:

- Mdm Chan. Interview by author, 29 March 2007, Singapore.
- Mdm Kok. Interview by author, 28 March 2007, Singapore.

### Secondary Sources:

- *Bojing nanming: Tianfugong yu fujian huiguan* 波靖南溟：天福宫与福建会馆 [Peaceful Waves from the Southern Seas: Tian Hock Keng Temple and the Fujian Association]. Singapore: Xinjiapo fujian huiguan, 2005.
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**About the Author:**

Chia Meng Tat, Jack; National University of Singapore

Chia Meng Tat, Jack graduated with a BA (Hons) in history from the National University of Singapore (NUS). He has been awarded the NUS Research Scholarship to pursue his Master's degree. His research interests include Buddhism, Chinese religions, Chinese diaspora, Modern Chinese history, and Singapore history.

**Contact Information:**

E-Mail: [mengtat@nus.edu.sg](mailto:mengtat@nus.edu.sg)